



**Questions from Charmian Spickernell, CPRE Wiltshire, for SWLEP Board on 25 November 2020.**

**QUESTION ONE**

How do Members of the SWLEP Board reconcile the building of new road infrastructure such as the tunnel inside the Stonehenge World Heritage Site and bypasses along the A350 with the need to mitigate against climate change and the trend for increasing working from home?

**RESPONSE**

The objective of the SWLEP is to achieve sustainable economic growth for Swindon and Wiltshire, which requires the Board to address issues of physical and digital connectivity and the principles of clean growth. In terms of physical links, the SWLEP has supported road improvements in the area as a means of addressing connectivity problems north to south in the area and east to west in South Wiltshire. This has been a focus of SWLEP economic planning since our inception and is still relevant.

Originally, we were guided by Government transport planning anticipating a 1% per year growth in traffic, which would mean a 35% increase by 2055. The Covid crisis has cast doubt on this trajectory and has led to more people working from home and certainly will mean greater investment in a resilient digital infrastructure. However, we need to see the impact of the vaccination programme on working and leisure patterns before being able to assess the reliability of transport forecasts into the medium and longer term from the range of sources with an interest in this aspect of Government policy. We continue to have a growing population in this country, and this has led to more travel. We are yet to see reliable evidence of a fundamental shift in travel patterns, other than those arising from Covid restrictions. Once the first lockdown ended, it did not take long for traffic levels in many parts of the country to return to pre-Covid numbers.

We are focussed on the decarbonisation of the transport network through the development of a reliable and comprehensive electric car charging infrastructure and in the medium term, the use of hydrogen as a fuel for commercial and public transport vehicles.

**QUESTION TWO**

The estimated cost of a Melksham Bypass is £130m. How much funding will Wiltshire Council provide and will the ability to fund infrastructure be a way that SWLEP and Homes England become overly powerful in deciding where new development should take place, ahead of statutory public consultation?

**RESPONSE**

The cost of a scheme to bypass Melksham via the A350 will be determined by a business case approved by the Department for Transport (DfT). Wiltshire Council could not afford such a scheme from its own resources and so will be bidding to the DfT for funding as the A350 is a



major road of strategic importance. Wiltshire Council has opened public consultation on potential routes. The SWLEP will respond to the consultation but has no role in funding the project. Any funding agreement would involve the DfT and Wiltshire Council.

The SWLEP cannot speak for Homes England.

### **QUESTION THREE**

Given the changes resulting from climate change and the pandemic and the importance of local resilience, do Board Members agree there should be more investment in local transport connections and in local public transport?

### **RESPONSE**

The SWLEP has developed strategies for Rail and Energy, which we are actively involved in implementing and which have been written with investment in mind. The Rail Strategy identifies service enhancements which will improve connectivity and economic performance. New services in some instances will lead to schemes to build new stations, such as the work underway to develop proposals for new stations at Devizes and Wilton.

The Energy Strategy includes objectives to develop provision for new energy vehicles. The SWLEP Board has approved four strategic outline business cases to move forward our policy on new energy vehicles. These are in relation to a hydrogen network demonstrator project, supported by a grant from the south west energy hub; a hydrogen logistics project focussing on fork-lift trucks powered by hydrogen fuel cells; a hydrogen bus demonstrator, exploring the use of hydrogen powered inter-city buses linking Bristol, Swindon, Salisbury and Oxford and a rural charging and re-fuelling network for electric and hydrogen-powered vehicles. Much of the work was developed in collaboration with neighbouring LEPs in Oxfordshire, the Thames Valley, Gloucestershire and the West of England.